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PERFORMER, SPECTATOR AND ANDROGYNE
An Exploration of Androgyny in Popular Culture

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INTRODUCTION

As a feminist visual artist I have long been concerned with issues of gender construction and difference and my work is beginning to reflect this. In my research into academic theories of sexuality and gender construction I was often confronted with the term 'Androgyny'. Androgyny derives from old French via Latin from the Greek, as 'aner' and 'gune' (man and woman). Literally androgyny translates as both male and female, that is, physically hermaphrodite. However, beyond the simply biological there are more complex concepts operating. These include mythological and religious symbolism, psychological theories of identity construction and pop culture iconography.

Fascinated with these concepts and using the available research on androgyny, I wanted to explore further the idea of androgyny in 20th century popular culture, paralleling specific decades where androgynous imagery was highly visible, namely 1920s Hollywood (Marlene Dietrich), with the current plethora of artists/performers using cross-dressing as a means of reaching an androgynous image (Madonna, Grace Jones, etc.). I also wanted to explore the significance of the androgynous image; who creates it, why and for what audience?

In this paper I hope to show a history of 'androgyny' in Western culture. This will include manifestations of the concept within literature, religion, psychology, film and television. I will explore the way in which the idea of androgyny is altered depending upon the discipline or area in which it appears, and will also define the way in which androgyny operates within theories of spectatorship and sexuality.

CHAPTER ONE

Cultural and Historical Androgyny

Androgynous thought in literature may not begin with Shakespeare but it definitely became a fixture from the sixteenth Century onwards. It has been argued that Hamlet is in fact feminine rather than masculine or perhaps a mixture of both; several productions of Hamlet have been conducted in the past ten years with a female lead. This is a complete reversal of the original productions which used boys for all the female roles until the eighteenth century. There are numerous cross-dressed roles in Shakespeare's plays, 'As You Like It', 'Twelfth Night' and 'The Merchant of Venice', to name a few. That these roles were acted by boys playing girls dressed as boys was of obvious amusement to the audience and the dialogue often reflects this with double entendre.

"A little thing would make me tell him how much I lack of a man"
and *"They shall think we are accomplished/With that we lack"* ¹

Because the language is so laden with these double meanings, whole productions of Shakspeare's comedies have been cross-dressed.² This interchangeability of gender assignment leads to the possibility of a mixed gender address and the existence of an androgynous spectatorship.

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the emergence of the novel over poetry as the dominant literary medium. Authoritative narrative style, either in the first or third person, dictated the sexual identification of the reader. The first person either male or female and the third person, arguably male, may in fact be read as either sex depending upon the gender of the reader. The Bronte sisters wrote as

men to find a publisher and an audience and even though they wrote from the female protagonist's point of view, their work received positive critical reviews from the male readers who in some way could identify with the heroine. Emily Bronte caused a minor scandal on the discovery that it was she, a woman, who wrote 'Wuthering Heights'. It was argued only a man could write such a narrative. Even after her identity was revealed some men refused to believe a woman could write from what they saw as masculine subjectivity.

"I belong to a third sex, a sex apart which has as yet no name..." ³

So speaks the main protagonist in Theophile Gautier's 1835 novel "Mademoiselle de Maupin" which concerns the rather Shakespearean exploits of the heroine who dresses as a man so as to meet the perfect mate and as Theodore, falls in love with a man, whose mistress at the same time falls in love with Theodore. The end, unlike a Shakespearean comedy, sees Theodore loving both friend and mistress and then departing still in male guise. 'Yentle the Yeshiva Boy' by Isaac B Singer has a similar plot and it ends with Yentle becoming Anshel and marrying a girl while in love with the girl's ex-boy friend. Once again the character departs both lovers, still in male guise. Both characters are bisexual and androgynous in that the cross-dressed person they become is never again female but never quite becomes male. They exist on another plane.

Virginia Woolf in "A Room of One's Own" suggests that every mind is bisexual and that all great writers use the "whole mind rather than just that which is male or female and are therefore androgynous"⁴ (this has already been argued about Shakespeare⁵). In her tribute to Shakespeare, 'Orlando'⁶, Woolf introduces the reader to Orlando, a young

man in Elizabethan England who metamorphoses into a woman and time travels into the twentieth century. Orlando may be seen as an androgynous self portrait despite its satirical humour.

Referencing 'Orlando' and satirizing twentieth century medical science, Angela Carter's 'Passion of the New Eve'⁷ has the young male protagonist surgically becoming the woman he always wanted to be, only to fall in love with a man who once was a woman. Eve is eventually cast out into a post apocalyptic desert where she is first imprisoned by a mad male rapist but is rescued by a band of amazons who impregnate her. She becomes the mother of the new race of wo/man kind. Interestingly, the image of the androgyne is often used in tandem with the apocalypse, at least in the last forty years. Comic books, science fiction and fantasy novels depict androgynes populating the earth or similar planets after a holocaust. (Heavy Metal Magazine, Ursula Le Guin etc..) If order is represented in society as the status quo, which embraces binary opposition and the subjectivity of gender difference, then chaos or holocaust would occur after the breakdown of this subjective gender opposition. One of the ways this could happen is if current gender relations were broken down and a form of androgynous sexuality adopted. This concept would seem to be operating subconsciously in the realm of fantasy and science fiction. I believe it can also be seen in films and music video clips as well. (I will explore this in Chapters Four and Five).

All of the above novels dealing with cross-dressed characters are, like Shakespeare, comic in part. However there is also a questioning and criticism of sex stereotyping and the limitations these impose. It is interesting to note that Yentle and Theodore, created by men, are women who become men while Orlando and Eve, created by

women, are men who become women. Could this be the writers experiencing through their work a form of personal transvestism without actually changing dress?

The tradition of cross-dressing then is common and at least artistically respected, whether the act of crossing the gender barrier for characters is in some way recognising the attempts at representing a symbolic need for an androgynous mind or subjectivity by artists and performers is something I will explore in chapter five.

The concept of androgyny as a spiritual state has existed since recorded history. Religious tradition both eastern and western have in their pantheon of gods and goddesses, androgynous beings.

"And God created human beings, male and female created them he, in his own image..." ⁸

Jewish Cabalistic tradition recognises the androgynous nature of the Hebrew god. Catholicism granted God a female essence in the concept of the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost with the Holy Ghost being feminine. In non-monotheistic religions many deities were given an androgynous nature out of political expediency; the original deity being either male or female and being supplanted or made subject to another god of the opposite sex after an invasion or migration, for example the Greek Goddess Hera was originally the supreme mother Goddess but after the Dorian invasion was forcibly married to Zeus and made subject to his will.⁹

However the most popular reason for the existence of androgynous gods would seem to be the belief that the combination of the sexes in one form produced the perfect being because it contained all the best qualities assigned to the sexes, for example the Buddhist Bohddisvatta Kuan ying who was both male warrior and female compassionate healer. Human beings were thought to have been split in half (Adam and Eve) soon after creation, in the process becoming male and female, and it was believed that this split could be healed and a perfect being created. For many followers, the androgynous aspect of a god became a nirvanic ideal and one that was attainable. Male and female castration and the status given to hermaphrodites, were attempts at gaining the attention of their god and of achieving this ideal.

The sexuality of androgynous gods was celebrated and worshipped by both sexes. Images of these gods are imbued with eroticism and they are often depicted in various stages of copulation with self or with others. (Fig 1) The gods were often depicted with both male and female genitalia or with male genitals and female breasts. (Fig 2) Often the image of the god is split in two with one half, the right, usually pictured as male and the left female. Interestingly in most cultures the right hand side or right hand, representing the majority of people, has symbolised that which is good, normal and male, while the left was and still is associated with evil and represents the female.

The universal appeal of the androgynous god seems to have influenced the depiction of other single sex gods. Krishna is often depicted as very effeminate as is Buddha, Christ and his followers, (Fig 3) particularly in Renaissance paintings lying supine, with white hairless skin, hips, a suggestion of breasts, no genitals and long flowing hair. For example, Da Vinci's 'John the Baptist' and the several



Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3

paintings of Saint Sebastian.(Fig 4) The creative powers of the feminine are also given to male gods, Zeus for instance gave birth to Athena and Dionysis and God enabled Adam to give birth to Eve. Jungian analysis and new age references to ying and yang concepts have continued the spiritual exploration of sexuality and androgyny in the west. Despite the growing secularisation of Western and Eastern society religious cults abound and many of these include androgynous spiritual concepts.

The importance of a history of androgyny in religion lies in the wealth of images available to us, the vast majority of art being created for religious purposes. These images are as much cultural icons as are images of the madonna and son, they are a part of our subconscious and are replayed constantly in various forms within popular culture. I will explore these forms in Chapter Three.



Fig 4

CHAPTER TWO

Psychological Androgyny

As I mentioned in the previous chapter the subconscious plays an important role in the creation of androgynous mythology, literature and art and so does gender identity and its construction. Any exploration of androgyny must first take into consideration the ongoing debate concerning sex differentiation. For an understanding of the nature of this debate one must first look at its beginnings; its biological, sociological, psychological and philosophical history. I will concentrate on the more influential and long standing ideas, positing them within the above categories.

Since the beginning of recorded history differences between the sexes have been documented, reasons for them postulated and a specific status awarded them. In Western culture those differences regarded as masculine and belonging to men were given greater status than those regarded as female and belonging to women. Better to be a strong, active and intelligent man than a weak, passive and intuitive female. Similarities between the sexes were not acknowledged and if encountered in an individual they were punished.

A philosophy of simple binary opposition dominated Western thinking from Aristotle to Freud. Those characteristics dubbed masculine and feminine were desirable and encouraged in their appropriate biological sex, any deviation from this "norm" was discouraged and regarded as a perversion. Freud, despite "discovering" the unconscious and human bisexuality, regarded any personality that was not conforming to its specific sex role, either feminine or masculine, as a perversion in men and neurosis in women, and these he

attempted to correct through psychoanalytic therapy. No criticism of the prevailing belief in the dichotomous relationship of the sexes was forwarded until feminist and Marxist ideology appeared in the 1860s and 1880s. Within them the power structures in society were identified and their ideologies questioned.

Recent research into sex differentiation from the fields of biology¹⁰ and psychology¹¹ have debunked the myth that differences could be explained biologically. Although biological differences exist, there are far more similarities and the differences are too few and their influence regarded as too small to explain the huge disparity in Western Culture between the roles and characteristics assigned to men and women. Rather more sophisticated methodologies have been suggested, these include; psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism and psychology (cognitive development, social learning and identification theories¹²). All acknowledge that differences exist and most that these differences begin in early childhood. The differences and similarities between them have been generalised and they have been grouped together (in the great tradition of dualism) with many other theories into two opposing camps in what has become colloquially known as the Nature versus Nurture debate.

Nature vs Nurture

The nature side of the argument assumes that human beings, like all animals, are biologically destined to receive the sex roles appropriate to each sex, that the male of the species is more powerful physically and is therefore more intelligent, resourceful, creative etc.

The oldest belief in this argument, it achieved its height in the nineteenth century with the work of the followers of Charles Darwin

who saw the white male domination of Western Civilisation as confirmation of the survival of the fittest. The Nature argument in recent times has been supported by bio-determinists, quasi-scientists like Desmond Morris, right wing politicians like Thatcher's Tory's and white supremacists like the Ku Klux Klan.

The Nurture side of the argument postulates that sex roles are learnt through identification or social conditioning and that they are self-perpetuating. Deviations are punished by societal institutions such as the family, education, law and the media, in order that the status quo be maintained and change does not occur. The Nurture argument has gained ground in the last twenty years with the increasing power of the feminist movement which has argued successfully against 'fixed' sex role typing by rediscovering women's active contribution to history and society, through 'hard' scientific investigation into biological and genetic characteristics¹³ and through more sophisticated psychological testing methods than previously used.

Psychology

To begin to understand Androgyny within these arguments I would like to look more closely at psychological definitions of sexual difference. Until recently, (in the last twenty years) psychology regarded sex differentiation in bipolar terms, in the tradition of Western culture. Tests run on subjects assumed that the subject must fit into either the masculine or feminine box.¹⁴ If the subject answered the set questions inappropriately it was thought something had gone very wrong in their up-bringing. To fit neatly into the boxes, it was argued that if a woman was sensitive to others and emotional then she must also be weak and dependent, while a man who was

aggressive and selfish would also have to be ambitious and independent. Personality scales relied upon the sex of the subject and a restrictive set of stereotypes that were believed to belong to that set. There was no middle ground.

With growing feminism and less societal pressure to conform, these tests became more and more inefficient, eventually leading to a sliding scale system of sex testing,¹⁵ in which the subject could move between the two opposites. Although this helped free up the stereotypes it did not change the essential view of sex as bipolar. However it has opened the way for the beginnings of a multi-dimensional reading of sexuality and introduced the concept of the androgyne to psychology. Psychological androgyny suggests that sex differentiation is a societal construct and that it can be changed and is being changed as society becomes more egalitarian. It has been argued that most human beings are naturally androgynous,¹⁶ but some appear to be restricted to the extremes of the masculine/feminine scale, probably through intense socialisation and identification. The majority of people however fall between the two opposites creating a need for a more complex form of testing.

Current psychological theory¹⁷ suggests that the differences between the sexes are in reality social constructs and that imposing restrictive sex roles is damaging, causing many social and psychological problems. A more multi-dimensional view of sexuality is required and within this multi-dimensionality of sexuality may lie the androgyne. Some psychologists believe we are moving towards this state and that we will no longer concern ourselves with the differences between the sexes but rather with individual personality, each being viewed as unique and not simply defined as either masculine or

feminine.

Whether or not Androgyny is just another Utopian ideal which denies the reality of sex and gender differences is something I will explore in the following chapters. I will be using case studies from 1930s Hollywood films and 1980s music videos, because of their popularity as forms of mass communication in their respective eras as well as their influence as trend and fashion signifiers and setters. There is a significant amount of cross-dressing and gender exchange occurring in both and I will give examples of these as well as what could be described as examples of androgynous agency which I believe does exist within the current discourse concerning theories of spectatorship.

CHAPTER THREE

Androgynous Icons

Late Twentieth Century culture appears to be living proof of the precognition of philosophers and art critics, as Postmodernism would appear to be upon us, at least in the most obvious eclecticism which has dominated recent popular culture. Music, art, film and television have embraced the concept and history is being plundered for its images. Not only are the images of the past being reused; they are also being refashioned and moulded to incorporate current thought and experience. But in this refashioning are the original meanings of the image still intact and if so, how are they manifesting themselves? Is this eclecticism really only a product of our current society or have we always used it?

In *fin de siecle* art, the femme fatale was a popular erotic symbol. She appeared out of the repressive morality of the nineteenth century and was a useful foil for the housewife at home on her pedestal, especially in the literature and art of the time. The Nineteenth Century femme fatale was overtly sexual and female; her familiar was the snake not only because of its phallic reference but also because it referred to the story of original sin. Adam and Eve were tempted by the vilest creature, the snake, who in later tradition became Lucifer the fallen angel but who was originally Lilith, Adam's first wife. Lilith was created by God from the same clay as Adam and would not agree to lie with Adam and be subject to his will because she was equal to him having been made from the same earth. In retaliation God struck her down and she became the snake. Not wanting a repeat episode, God made Adam another mate, this time from Adams rib. Thus Eve was born of Adam and was therefore subject to his will.

In an act of defiance, it would seem that the snake was trying to give Eve a taste of the power she had had, by offering her knowledge and wisdom. So the snake symbolises the fear of the feminine as much as the presence of the phallus. It also symbolises the androgyne, one snake devouring its own tail thus forming a circle and two snakes entwined together, their heads meeting and their bodies forming a figure eight. (Fig 5)

In the Twentieth Century the femme fatale appeared in the movies and again reflected the fears of her time. She was as often depicted female as she was androgynous. Marlene Dietrich for example was both overtly feminine and mysteriously androgynous. There can be no doubt that dressing a woman in masculine attire was very erotic for the average 1920s man and woman given the amazing popularity of Dietrich for both sexes. Why was this so and why has it continued to be such a popular motif?

In the interests of social conditioning cross-dressing has until very recently been a crime against church and state. At the end of the Nineteenth Century, women's emancipation, the increase in a female labour force and more leisure time for the middle classes began a trend which saw more unisex clothing appear. This trend peaked for both sexes in the 1960s. It was in the 1920s and 1930s that the first and most complete cross-dressing occurred. Women dressed in three-piece suits and men first began to dress in female drag; at least it began in the film industry as the lesbian and male homosexual communities had incorporated cross dressing into their culture for years.



Fig 5

The burgeoning cabaret and club scenes which began to spread through Europe and the USA in the 1920s owed as much to the homosexual community in terms of implied decadence and an avant garde status as they did to Afro-American music.

It was these cultural traditions that film depicted, providing a moralistic narrative to weave it all together, tantalising its audience with forbidden fruits and then reconfirming its superiority and apparent normalcy with heavy-handed morality.

CHAPTER FOUR

Spectatorship and Hollywood Androgyny

Spectatorship

Cinema is the perfect medium for the spectator to indulge in the pleasure of fantasy, a surface on which to project one's desires. It is a tableau of images projected into the darkness where a spectator may indulge his or her senses in an illusion of privacy. Thus it operates on the same level as dream and fantasy. Looking specifically at the 1920s and 1930s work of Von Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich, I will be exploring the dreams and fantasies which were being addressed, what these entailed and in what way they were realised. In order to do this I will first establish a theory of spectatorship within which to discuss these questions.

A great deal of intellectual debate has centred around the mechanisms of spectatorship and the politics of viewing. Much of this began in the 1970s when a group of intellectuals used the theories of Freud and Lacan to critique the cinematic process. Laura Mulvey, in her article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'¹⁸, identifies the possessor of the gaze as male and the pleasure in looking and objectifying, called scopophilia, as masculine. Using psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey suggests that the male spectator is controlled by the machinations of the castration complex which has created the fetishization of the female body. On observing that the female does not have a penis the boy becomes aware of the possibility of castration. He assumes that the female has lost the phallus. The boy enters his Oedipal stage, both desiring and fearing the female form, first in the person of his mother,, then through fear of castration by the father, to

the body of another woman. Because of the trauma involved in this recognition of the absence of a penis in women, the boy focuses his attention and then desire on an object, a fetish.¹⁹

Mulvey identifies this process as fetishistic scopophilia and argues that the act of looking is an act of possession, that it is the female who is possessed and fetishized by the male spectator. She argues that the act of looking is masculine because it is active and possessing and that the female is passive and therefore does not control the gaze.²⁰ But is Mulvey correct, is the gaze always active, aggressive and masculine?

Although Lacan avoids the biological views of Freud in the emphasis of language and the symbolism of the phallus, he, like Mulvey and other psychoanalytic theorists cannot escape the importance of the genitals, penis envy and the castration complex in the construction of gender identity and the formulation of theories of spectatorship. Psychoanalysis does not explain the position of the masochistic male spectator whose pleasure derives from an identification with the pain and suffering of the male protagonist,²¹ nor the position of female spectators that derive pleasure in identifying with the male gaze. Mulvey attempts to explain the position of the female spectator forced to see through the male gaze as a recalled memory from a woman's phallic phase of that which was shared by males and females in their pre-Oedipal stage.²² It is this memory of a repressed active sexuality that the cinematic experience unleashes. Kaja Silverman writes that the cinema creates a masochistic misrecognition that confronts female spectators with characters and role models "impossibly noble and self sacrificing". This creates a 'negative narcissism' that encourages self-loathing.²³ Silverman believes that it is therefore

impossible to have a positive female spectatorship within such patriarchal narrative structures

Other theories of spectatorship offer a more fluid, less determinist view. Janet Bergstrom talks about the spectator taking up "multiple identificatory positions."²⁴ Laurence Kubie suggests that the pleasure in looking has much to do with the fantasy of being both sexes. He refers to the opposite of penis envy, the envy of men for the reproductive powers of women, and cites the Freudian case of the boy who couldn't wait to have babies like his mother.²⁵ The fetishization of the female breast by men may indeed be an expression of male mammary envy.

During the 1980s feminist film criticism turned away from cine-psychoanalysis of gender and spectatorship because its negative determinist and monolithic stance left no room for alternative view points other than a universal masculine one. It failed to account for the presence and pleasure of female audiences in cinemas since their inception nor did it attempt to recognise alternative formative gender structures such as class, race and non-nuclear families. Feminist writers instead turned to Nancy Chodorow and Luce Irigaray who refused to recognise 'Woman' in terms of aberrance and deviance from the 'normative' male. (Even Lacan constructed woman from language as being "not of man".²⁶)

Chodorow, using object relations analysis, which posits that the human being is a social construction, rejects the anatomical inferiority of women lacking penises supported by psychoanalysis and its belief that this causes female inferiority, neurosis and a hatred of the mother. Instead Chodorow sees the identification with the first

love-object, the mother, as a source of self identity, placing her in the broader context of a social community through female friendships which replicate this original love.²⁷

For boys this identification with the mother must be repressed and denied if the boy is to successfully enter patriarchal society. And so males develop a sense of self which is separate, different and other. This creates a strong individualism, isolation and a lack of emphatic socialisation. The evidence to support this theory comes from Chodorow's own research and in much recent sociological and psychological work.²⁸ Kubie also supports this theory in part, believing that all humans are basically bisexual, that gender is fluid and multiple spectatorial positions are possible.²⁹

Such theories when used to formulate alternative views of spectatorship to the monolithic psychoanalytic model, create a diversified and vigorous climate in which bisexual and androgynous readings of film spectatorship are encouraged. Using these arguments I will look at the various spectatorial positions at work in Von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus*.

Dietrich and Von Sternberg

"Dietrich's initiation of the look or her active looking back undermines the notion that the male gaze is always one of control. Not only does the female assume her particular powers within the masochistic dynamic, but she rejects her audiences attempts at tactile possession."

Von Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich combined to make seven films together in the 1930s. From the beginning Dietrich had been given star status along with Greta Garbo. Both women began their film careers in Europe in the 1920s and both were adopted by Hollywood. Much of their mystique and exotic appeal for American audiences derives from their being European. For Dietrich her films with Von Sternberg represent her best work (except for her appearance in 'Judgement at Nuremburg'.) It was in these films that she established the image that she is always remembered for: the mysterious and beautiful sex-goddess.

Time and a changing audience have meant that Dietrich has become a symbol of high camp, particularly in the Von Sternberg films, not only because of the importance of style over narrative, but also because of a bi-sexed gaze which is evident within them.

Synopsis; Blonde Venus

Dietrich's heroine in *Blonde Venus* is Helen Faraday, an ex-stage performer who is married and has a child, who must return to the stage to help pay for her husband Ned's trip to England and the operation he must have there to save his life. Unable to earn enough money she resorts to prostitution with a gangster, Nick Townsend, who has fallen in love with her after seeing her perform. Helen's husband leaves and she and Nick move into a flat together while she waits for her husband's return. When Ned returns he finds out about the boyfriend and leaves with their child. Helen kidnaps the child and flees into the underworld of vice and poverty. She is eventually apprehended by the police and her son taken away from her. Her husband repays the money she had earned for him and she says goodbye to Nick. Several years later, Nick while travelling, comes across a billboard advertising the

performance that night of a new star who is of course Helen. Seeing her again Nick asks her to marry him and she turns him down. However two months later a newspaper announces their engagement. Helen and Nick arrive at Ned's house and Helen asks to see her son. Ned is reluctant to but agrees when Johnny, their son asks his parents to tell him the story of when they first met and fell in love. As they relate the story to Johnny a reconciliation seems to occur and the film ends with the audience assumption that the marriage may be saved after all.

Despite the obvious melodrama and suspect morality, 'Blonde Venus' contains a multitude of audience positionings. Dietrich as self-sacrificing mother and wife is a patriarchal convention that women spectators will attempt to identify with while males see her as fulfilling her masochistic role as Oedipal mother. Dietrich then becomes the whore, femme fatale, the female sex slave, all strong symbols of male sexual pleasure in the objectification of the female. Dietrich's performance has her parade the stage in feathers and sequins which enhance the visual eroticism her character changes imply.

As the mother on the run she is seen as having a very close relationship with her son and it is easy to see the Oedipal inference here, as well as the suffering victim which again women would be forced to identify with. When Helen loses her son and says goodbye to Nick she appears to be at her lowest and in true heroic tradition decides to get back on top again. Which she apparently does when Nick finds her again performing in her own show. When he proposes to her Helen is dressed in a white tuxedo. Tipping her top hat to Nick, she declines his offer and appears totally independent and equal. The studio, however, decided an appropriate ending had to include a reconciliation with Ned and son, so that the mother returns and the

family lives happily ever after.³¹

Despite the traditional patriarchal narrative and ending, Helen's fall from grace and her reinstatement through her own efforts made *Blonde Venus* a popular film with women audiences, so much so it became classed as a 'women's film', that is films that were recognised as appealing specifically to women. But *Blonde Venus* also provided a somewhat disturbing address to men. A simple psychoanalytical reading would see the men competing for the attention of the women, playing out their own castration complex, while the boy is immersed in a pre-Oedipal phallic-mother adoration stage which subconsciously the men want to return to. Dietrich's power then lies in her attainment of the phallus through her son. Another reading using psychoanalytic language might see the attainment of power by Dietrich in the form of her appearance masquerading as a man.

*"The transvestite wears clothes which signify a different sexuality a sexuality that for the woman, allows a mastery over the image and the very possibility of attaching the gaze to desire."*³²

Helen has become an androgynous being, adopting the guise of one sex while retaining something of the original. In her dressing room pinned to her mirror is the quotation 'Down to gehenna or up to the throne/he travels fastest who travels alone'. A client at the club tells Nick, "She is as cold as the proverbial icicle," and that she has used men as stepping stones to her wealth and fame. Helen has not only acquired male attire, she has become an independent powerful being who has cut off emotional warmth and who has become controller of the gaze. She sees Nick in the audience and we see him from her perspective as an object of desire., When he proposes to her she meets

his eye and her ownership of the gaze is assured. (Fig 6)

Dietrich's initiation of the look not only contradicts Mulvey's theory that the male gaze is always active and the female passive, it also provides a position in which both the male and the female gaze are combined. The multiplicity of positions of spectatorship in 'Blonde Venus' and in other Dietrich/Von Sternberg films like 'Morocco' and the 'Scarlet Empress' have in some ways been acknowledged by the cult status these films have acquired within the gay and lesbian community. For they open the discourse into homoerotic, masochistic and androgynous spectatorship while at the same time being included in the dominant patriarchal tradition of film narrative.



Fig 6

CHAPTER FIVE

Androgynous Music Videos

"I've just met Elvis and she is beautiful." ³³

Madonna on meeting kd lang.

Music Television

The history of rock music is one of rebellion, a celebration of youth culture and the defining medium of that culture. Pop music is the mainstreaming of rock and its youth ideology for wider audience appeal and greater profitability. Publications like the NME (New Musical Express) in England and the Rolling Stone Magazine in the U.S. highlight the differences between pop and rock while operating as the major forum for the culture's ideologies. Rock is regarded as 'Fine Art', its lineage dating back through Jazz and Blues with a touch of folk music. Pop music, as its name suggests, is commercial, operating (as do most Hollywood films) from a financial rather than from an 'art base'. It was basically a desire to sell the product that created the phenomenon of music videos.

Music Television (MTV) came into existence in the United States in 1981 as a commercial 24 hour cable television channel. It was the creation of Robert Pittman, the vice president of Warner Amex Satellite Entertainment Company (WASEC), but is now owned by Viacom. Advertising was its main source of revenue and it did very well in selling product to the youth audience. By 1984 MTV had become extremely popular making an estimated 20 million dollars a week in advertising revenue alone, having also signed several lucrative record company deals and had an estimated audience of between 18 and 22

million.³⁴ Although music videos had been around since the 1960s (and in fact music short films existed as early as 1949; black blues/jazz musicians like Duke Ellington promoted their music through film clips) and television had music magazine type shows to cater to the youth audience, it wasn't until the success of MTV that the importance of music videos and their popularity with the youth market became recognised.

The introduction of FM radio and its immense popularity combined with the newly acquired status of music videos produced a market reaction which has made even the purist Rolling Stone Magazine and other Rock enthusiasts adopt the new medium and organise it from within its own definitions of rock and pop. MTV has created an industry awards show to rival the Grammy awards, concentrating on audience polls and innovative video clips rather than on the opinion of peers which the Grammys, like the Oscars, relies on. MTV has achieved a world wide audience through television stations like Australia's Kerry Packer owned Channel Nine, which uses the station's logo and name but has a local 'Vee Jay' (Video Jockey), plays local as well as international videos and only broadcasts for four hours one night a week. MTV arrived in Australia in the mid 1980s and its popularity here has sparked off a stream of music video shows which have enjoyed similar success. These include 'Video Hits', a three hour program on channel Ten, and 'Rage', an all night music program on the Australian Broadcasting Commission, that runs from midnight Friday till nine in the morning and then again on Saturday night from midnight till eight in the morning.

The marketability of music videos has created a new industry which manufactures only music videos but which rivals Hollywood's

star system, its technical innovation and its profitability. Just as television did in the early 1950s, music videos in the 1980s and 1990s provide a new set of cultural icons and technologies which, although unique in many ways, still refer back to the mythologies of Hollywood and the historical and cultural icons which continue to dominate all three industries, Music, Television and Film. As I have explored some of these icons in earlier chapters, I will now turn my attention to the way they manifest themselves in music videos, paying particular attention to androgyny and spectatorship.

Music Videos

*"The most important effect of gender bending was to focus the problem of sexuality onto males. In pop, the question became, what do men want? And as masculinity became a packaging problem, then so did masculine desire... On video, music can be mediated through the body directly."*³⁵

E. Anne Kaplan in her book "Rocking Around the Clock", describes five types of video which she defines as Romantic, Socially Conscious, Nihilist, Classical and Post Modernist. Under Nihilist, Kaplan introduces Androgyny, videos which depict predominantly male performers, dressed ambiguously, rather than cross-dressed, from heavy metal and punk music. This opens up an interesting debate which looks at sexuality and the ownership of the sexual gaze. In Hollywood, sexuality was given to women (Dietrich in 'Blonde Venus') and in classical Hollywood narrative the owner of the gaze is male.³⁶ In music videos however, it is the male performer who would seem to have inherited this sexuality.

Chris Straayer, in her article 'The She-Man,'³⁷ looks specifically at the male heavy-metal performer and at what she defines as his acquisition of sexual power through the sexualisation of his body, in the same way as women's bodies have traditionally been sexualised through film and television. Referencing psychoanalysis, Straayer defines the power of sexuality and sexual masquerade through the phallic mother and what she terms the Medusan Femme.

*"Vagina envy, as evidenced in some She-Men, suggests that female sexuality is challenging the phallus' position as the dominant signifier... female sexuality is neither simply a sign of lack, inciting castration anxiety, nor a generator of signs within Levi Strauss's parameters. It is rather a primary signifier erupting into culture like a volcano in the suburbs."*³⁸

Straayer, unlike Mulvey, grants the bi-sexed cross dressed male performer an erotic impact. Although Mulvey does grant the male star objecthood, that is, to be looked-at-ness, this is devoid of erotic intent.

*"Because Mulvey conceives the look to be essentially active in its aims, identification with the male protagonist is only considered from a point of view which associates it with a sense of omnipotence, of assuming control of the narrative. She makes no differentiation between identification and object choice in which sexual aims may be directed towards the male figure."*³⁹

Within a multiplicity of spectatorships there is room for homoeroticism, repressed homosexual voyeurism and male masochism

which views the male subject as an erotic object. Bands like Motley Crue, Dekkon, Twisted Sister, Warrant and Guns n' Roses, present heavy metal music with a transvestic image and are most popular with 16 to 30 year old white males.⁴⁰(Fig 7) Arguably then, these fans are reacting to the eroticization of this image from a gaze which is bisexual.

The majority of music videos are of male authorship. This is a carry over from the early to mid 1980s when the largest group in the viewing audience of MTV were white males between the ages of 16 and 35.⁴¹ For commercial reasons therefore, MTV programming was specifically geared to satisfying and pandering to its audience. The fact that MTV showed only a minor selection of women performers (15%) and an even smaller percentage of black American performers (2%) throughout the 1980s would seem to support this view.⁴²

The popularity of groups which have an image that is basically transvestic with the MTV viewing audience (35% of the music videos played on MTV were heavy metal) also points to the possibility that there is a definite subconscious desire in the audience for the male cross-dressed performer. What then, is the popularity, though not as profound, of cross-dressed female performers?

"Feeling like a woman, looking like a man."⁴³

Grace Jones, One Man Show.

Grace Jones' eroticism, like that of the She-Man, comes from cross-dressing, from her outward adoption of the opposite sex's clothing and persona. (Fig 8) In her video clip of 'Walking In The Rain' Jones wears a man's suit, shoes, dark glasses and a crew cut. Her



Fig 7



Fig 8

movements are robotic and stilted and even the fact that her bare chest is in evidence does not alter the power of her masquerade. The sexual codings which we use as human beings to identify the sex of a subject are here confused. 'Looking like a man', even having a flat chest would indicate maleness, however Jones' assertion that she is in fact a woman and the media apparatus that informs us that she is a woman combine to suggest androgyny.

Grace Jones began her career as a model and is Afro-American. The stereotypes which surround the fashion world and black sexuality are deliberately manipulated by Jones and her manager to produce an image which is both stylishly sophisticated and sensual and at the same time outwardly masculine. Jones has since gone on to appear in movies which reflect her image which is exotic, sexual and deadly. In fact she has become typecast as an often androgynous femme fatale.

Madonna also plays on stereotypes and sexuality but has an extensive repertoire which continuously changes and is revamped. From 'Boy Toy' to Marilyn Monroe clone to sado-masochistic cross-dresser, Madonna is constantly exploring her sexuality and the impact it has on her audience. Madonna's first video clip 'Borderline' shown on MTV in 1984 shows her adopting several personae from street larrikin to fashion model, crossing gender boundaries by appropriating "activities and spaces typically associated with male adolescence."⁴⁴

Continuing her appropriation of male privilege and position Madonna dresses in masculine attire and monocle in the video clip of 'Express Yourself' where she plays a dominant mogul who is in control of a large foundry, where her employees, all bare-chested men, submit

to her demands. Stylistically referencing Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis', she is playing with society's acceptable notions of female sexuality, on the one hand being domineering and powerful whilst at the same time exposing her breasts through slits in the double breasted man's suit.

Madonna's obvious interest in sexuality and its signifiers is most evident in a series of photographs by Steven Miesel, published in Rolling Stone Magazine⁴⁵, where Madonna adopts poses from Brassai's 1920s photos of Parisian nightlife. These include herself as a prostitute, butch dyke and a cross-dressed brothel madam whose charges are all male transvestites (figs 9,10).

Both Madonna and Grace Jones, through shrewd manipulation of sexual iconography produce images that are both sexually provocative and appear androgynous. Unlike the She-Man, who adopts female sexuality and therefore power and desirability, through the tradition of female sexual objectification, Jones and Madonna explore their own sexuality which may include cross-dressing and the adoption of masculine attributes. In such cases sexuality remains female even in male guise; Madonna and Jones are not exploring male sexuality. It would seem that femaleness defines sexuality, although the gaze may be both male and female. In *Rocking Around the Clock*, Kaplan observes that;

*"TV in general and MTV in particular, constructs a variety of gazes that indicate address to a certain kind of male or female imaginary...there is sometimes a genderless address, and also that people of both genders undertake multiple identifications, depending on what particular video is being shown."*⁴⁶



Fig 9



Fig 10



Fig 10

Kaplan also attributes this cross gender gaze to the "androgynous surface of many star images".⁴⁷ But is it androgyny that engages the spectator or is it traditional female sexuality re-vamped and disguised?

Annie Lennox fronted a two piece band called 'The Eurythmics' in the early and mid eighties. Her image was deliberately marketed as androgynous.(fig 11) The video for 'Sweet Dreams' (1981) depicts Lennox as an androgynous robot, who briefly adopts a sado-masochistic personality, with a whip, before returning to the asexual, ungendered robot persona. 'Love is a Stranger' (1981) re-introduces the robot, who once again metamorphoses into a sado-masochistic character in leather, before returning again to the robotic androgyne.

Lennox continuously contrasts the asexual androgyne with an overtly sexual female character. Unlike Madonna, whose characters reflect different aspects of her own sexuality, Lennox masquerades and her characters remain an artifice. Another interesting performer who also cross-dresses is Nina Hagen, who not only completely cross-dresses with moustache and side burns, but also has a large octave range which enables her not only to look like a man but to sound like one too. Hagen therefore, is probably more transvestic than she is androgynous. Boy George, in the video 'Do You Really Want to Hurt Me', creates an image that is not just transvestic but has elements that may be androgynous, in that the makeup and clothes he wears cross both genders rather than referencing one.

In contrast, Michael Jackson wears only male attire but through extensive plastic surgery has become an asexual androgyne. In a stage performance in 1991 Madonna caused a minor furore. She performed



Fig 11

'Express Yourself', dressed in male garb and at one point grabbed her crotch in an identical gesture to that which has become Michael Jackson's trademark, but whereas Jackson's crotch grabbing does not raise an eyebrow, Madonna's provoked censorship. The usual sexual double standard aside, I believe that Madonna's gesture was more powerful than Jackson's because it exudes sex. Jackson's gesture is choreography and his persona asexual and androgynous, despite his attempts to be otherwise. The only other performer today who is actually defined by the media and herself as androgynous is kd lang. In an interview Lang described herself as being 'psychologically androgynous'⁴⁸ and her appearance, which is non-gender specific in dress, hairstyle and without the use of make-up, reflects this. Unlike Michael Jackson, lang has a sexuality (she defines her sexuality as lesbian); she is not asexual despite her androgyny.

In summary, men in video clips have become objectified, unable to identify male sexuality, many have taken on the outward signifiers of female sexuality, giving the impression of erotic power, but sexuality remains masquerade. Women in pop and rock music and the television apparatus have created an audience that is both male and female and spectatorship is no longer restricted to the masculine heterosexual. They have begun to explore the constructs of their own sexuality and to re-invent it. Referencing traditional female stereotypes such as the femme fatale and the prostitute, many have adopted masculine clothing and attitude, which outwardly gives the appearance of androgyny but operates similarly to Dietrich's cross-dressing as enhancers of female sexuality which are desirable to a multitude of spectatorial positions.

CONCLUSION

For me the exploration of androgyny has highlighted the way in which Femininity and Masculinity are manipulated and deemed normative by the dominant ideological structures which control society and culture. Evidence of the existence of these structures may be seen in the way that sexuality and gender identity are constructed and depicted within popular culture and theoretical discourse. Androgyny offers a choice beyond simple masculine and feminine binary opposition and it opens the way to a reading of sexuality from any number of subject positions instead of the one male gaze.

As I explored in Chapter Two, the meanings and construction of sexuality suggest a range of responses that are not simply defined by bio-determinism or cultural dualism. Instead we see that human desire is far more complex and multiplistic despite what would seem to be an overwhelming attempt via Hollywood film and Music Video narrative structures to enforce dualism upon us. As I concluded in Chapter Four an apparently traditional narrative, like that in *Blonde Venus*, may actually contain subversive spectatorial positions, which the use of crossdressing in the film highlights. Although androgyny, in many instances, operates on the same level as masquerade, as a commercial device rather than an actual ideal, it does however open up the debate on traditional sex role stereotyping and sexuality, offering alternatives to the normative structures.

Marjorie Garber observes;

"The compelling force of transvestism in literature and culture comes from its instatement of metaphor itself, not as that for which a

*literal meaning must be found, but precisely as that without which there would be no such thing as meaning in the first place."*⁴⁹

Garber seems to suggest that cross-dressing operates in the symbolic; its meaning would depend upon the interpretation of the performer and the spectatorial positions the audience is offered. We have observed that Madonna continuously manipulates her image which is in a constant state of flux, she is extremely popular with both male and female audiences, offering them a variety of spectator positions to identify with. Madonna, like Dietrich and Von Sternberg, provides the audience with fantasy and wish fulfillment while at the same time presenting aspects of their own sexuality and desire to the public. This then allows the audience not only the luxury of indulging in projected fantasy but also to identify with the actuality of sexual difference and diversity through the character of the performer.

Not only the continuing popularity of performers and artists who crossdress or espouse androgynous ideals, but their very existence as performers and the very fact that there is an audience for them, is an indication of the presence of sexual difference and diversity within our culture and society. Androgyny works on many levels from simple masquerade to complex theoretical discourse. Whenever and however it is found, (even by way of comic ridicule intended to reinforce the dominant structures) I believe that in every instance it works to subvert these, by evidencing, albeit symbolically or metaphorically, that which is unique and independent of such structures.

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